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ABSTRACT

The problems encountered in restructuring teacher education programs to train regular teachers in special education skills to meet the needs of mainstreamed students are examined. It is concluded that there is an overlap in content in education courses and that many of the subjects already required, such as psychology, prepare teachers to cope with the special child. If such subjects are stressed there is little need for radical curriculum changes. (JD)

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The Effective Fit of Regular and Special Education Competencies in the Preparation of Regular Classroom Teachers

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The College of Saint Teresa is a resident Catholic college for women with a total enrollment of 850. The Education Department enrollment is 95 with a department faculty of 7. A Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) Deans' Grant for the three year period 1979-82 was awarded in May, 1978. Project outcomes to date may offer insights for institutions contemplating changes in education departments to meet P.L. 94-142 teacher requirements.

The College of Saint Teresa has over the past decade made a strong commitment to special education. In addition to a series of regular education programs leading to certification from pre-school to secondary level teaching the College also has certifiable programs in Mental Retardation, Speech and Language, and a minor concentration in Learning Disabilities.

Having agreement with the fundamental principles of the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) Deans' Grants in which the content of special education is infused with regular education methodology to produce a new breed of regular education teacher capable of her designated role in the implementation of P.L. 94-142, the Education Department faculty actively supported the submission of the Deans' Grant, Preparing Regulars in Special Education (PRISE).

The basic approach in PRISE, as set forth in the original grant application, was a one week faculty workshop with an overview of the broad cross-categorical content taught in the LD minor concentration.

In the second week, with these competencies for dealing with mildly handicapped students in the regular classroom in mind, the

faculty was to complete a planning matrix in which a match between competencies and existing regular courses content would be developed. From this matrix, plus additional faculty inservice and field work, course changes would be made.

Basically, the end product of compatible special education content integrated into regular courses was acceptable but it was thought by the field readers and project officer that the approach was too hurried. Although initially it was hard to accept the outcome that the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) did not feel the carefully planned project would work, in retrospect, their more meticulous tack of studying the department before making changes has made significant difference in the insights and progress made to this point.

Essentially, the more thoughtful approach involved a careful analysis of the core education department offerings by the project coordinator auditing all class sessions of core courses. The purpose of the audit was, primarily, to determine where the special education competencies would fit compatibly into the required courses. With this data, and the insights gained by the faculty from the ongoing monthly workshops on topics relating to servicing the mildly handicapped in the regular classroom, the original matrix was to be completed the second summer.

Several unexpected outcomes have resulted in the carrying out of this plan that seem particularly relevant to share with other colleges of education irrespective of size and perceived match with our institution and situation.

Course Overlap

Recurring comments of faculty members, although their support for the concepts of the Deans' Grant is exceptional, have been: "my course is already overloaded, how can I add any of that new P.L. 94-142 content?" and in a slightly different vein, "I only have a chance to expose students to important content now; how can we add more?" Course audits have produced significant answers to these quires.

In the six courses audited in the first two terms generically described as Introduction to Psychology, Foundations of Education, Science Methods, Social Studies and Language Arts Methods, Learner (Educational Psychology and Child Development), and Human Relations it was found that a substantial percentage of instructional time was duplication of effort. Examples of this are emphatically clear in the area of Intellectual Development. Piaget background and implications are covered in four courses for a total of eight clock hours. However, there is a great similarity of the content.

In light of this substantial duplication perhaps there are some obvious answers to these questions. Our current approach in attempting to resolve these overlaps, for instance in the Piaget area, is to have the faculty members specify the instructional objectives for the topic in their respective courses. Instructional objective analysis should more clearly indicate direct overlap and the match between logical sequence of objectives and current order of presentation in courses. This type of analysis in all overlap areas will result in a careful restructuring.

Given the imperative need for more clock hours of training in the preparation of regular education teachers, perhaps a scrutiny of the use of current course overlap is the first step before automatically assuming a fifth year is the answer. It may be that the existing duplication of content could be justified under the guise of the spiral curriculum. However, it would likely be better to more carefully emulate the direct teaching approach as called for in I.E.P. planning. If modelling of teaching plays a significant role in the development of perspective teachers, (how often has "you teach the way you have been taught" been stated?) perhaps seeing the adherence to mastery learning in college classes may carry over to working with handicapped children (an area, heretofore, often neglected). If the freshmen are aware that the content covered in educational psychology will be directly drawn on in later courses, relevance for early learning may be more thoroughly established. Also the professor of freshmen level courses will know that other instructors will hold students accountable for previously learned material.

Are Special and Regular Education That Different?

A second issue that has come about as the result of course audits relates both to "only the time to expose" problem and the notion of integration of a new content from the discipline of special education. Some of the salient concepts of a direct instruction approach in special education seem to hold a close similarity with regular education concepts taught commonly in beginning courses. Reference is specifically being made to content such as Gagné's Hierarchy of Learning, use of Behavioral Objectives, Child Development, and Individual Differences.

If for instances, the implications of Gagné's Hierarchy were taught at more than an exposure level with mastery expected beyond Bloom's information stage, much could be accomplished in making prospective teachers more proficient in direct instruction. Much of the success of Englemann's DISTAR materials in special education has come from careful application of the types of thinking underlying Gagné's Hierarchy. DISTAR's approach to curriculum design should be replicable by most teachers if necessary in planning for slow learning students. Although teachers may rarely have to put work into curriculum design, their judgments on the match of curriculum and the child's learning needs may do much to avert the occurence of learning problems. These benefits to children can accrue from a more rigorous teaching of standard regular education content.

Equally as important was the realization, at the College of Saint Teresa, that there is a great deal of similarity in regular and special education competencies, counter to the original hypothesis which held that much new content from the world of special education would have to be added. An example here easily makes this apparent. Examination of the content of an Introductory Psychology textbook will show a host of areas that relate to "special education": A unit on sensation and perception relate to many of the views of perceptual disabilities underlying learning handicaps, a unit on genetics relates to biological causes of handicapping conditions, a unit on intelligence relates to its positive and negative effects on programming for handicapped children. This listing of relations could go on; the point, however, is with some slight

modifications, many areas traditionally covered on the Special Education domain of "Exceptional Children" can be dealt with in existing course structures. Currently, the barrier is an awareness by both regular and special educators of the close match of content, often separated only by language barriers.

Lack of the use of common jargon among course instructors introduces another range of inefficiency in teacher training. The College of Saint Teresa gained national recognition for its program in science education methodology several years ago. The program trains teachers to develop in elementary students the ability to think scientifically i.e. make observations, form and test hypotheses, control variables, etc. In the process, the prospective teacher must learn these skills. Faculty awareness that students in courses taken after the Unified Science sequence have these well-tuned thinking skills certainly should make a difference in how one might approach teaching education methods. For instance, the traditional special education content on: data collection, task analysis, objective setting and evaluation is directly analogous to Unified Science processes.

The author, for three years in teaching Diagnosis and Remediation, was not aware of the power to be gained by converting many of his terms into the language of Unified Science which was inculcated over a three semester sequence. Similarly the science educator was not aware that much of the grand goal of learning special techniques to serve handicapped children could powerfully be met by application of Unified Science thinking skills. The balance of the faculty had little awareness of what either professor was doing and consequently perpetuated other sets of terms for essentially the same content and processes.

It could be defensible that, after all, teachers are being trained to develop the thinking of our children, so they certainly should be able to integrate these diverse bodies of information coming from their various professors into a common structure. Perhaps in an ideal world yes, but given the time pressures and the other levels of concern of undergraduates it's not likely many students make these conceptual leaps and integrate systems of information.

If a special education reference may be permitted again, the use of consistency and unification of concepts in teacher preparation seems somewhat analogous to the rationale for selecting a direct instruction approach for a child having a problem in a whole word basal series because the basal does not allow the child to abstract the principles of reading from the myriad of uncontrolled content words in its approach.

Proposal Solutions and Courses of Action

The problems of duplication with and without consistency of jargon certainly are not limited to the College of Saint Teresa. In fact, given its small size, close proximity of faculty, excellent NCATE ratings, etc., although deficits have been discussed, it is most likely there is a higher degree of sharing and awareness than in many colleges of education.

In attempting to heighten the awareness of the entire faculty of the total education program, it is useful to think in terms of course content objectives revolving around an established set of competencies spelled out in sequential fashion. In addition, the establishment of common jargon with its synonymous terms is important.

In attempting to develop in the education faculty an awareness of the language and techniques of Unified Science, more broadly, the following approach was taken. The author gave a hypothetical spelling problem case to the science educator who was naive in this area of diagnosis and remediation. However, using the Unified Science process skills he solved the case, describing for the faculty the skills he was using to reach the case solution. This proved to be an extremely powerful way to demonstrate the under-utilization made of a potent tool for prospective teachers in solving student's academic deficits.

A much more simple course of action to beginning planning for meeting the mandates of P.L. 94-142 in teacher training can be utilized in most education departments to reach the level of awareness which the College of Saint Teresa reached through the time consuming class audits.

At the first level ask faculty to set out their objectives for common strands that permeate education training: intellectual development, behavioral objectives, discipline, etc. Study of these objectives should reveal a surprising degree of overlap and a basis for change.

In regards to the similarity of special and regular education content, faculty can get a handle on this by hours of discussion but perhaps more parsimoniously a facilitator skilled in both areas could draw out the likeness of day to day content by analyzing detailed sylabus or student's and/or professor's notes. These likenesses can be the focal point of further faculty discussion.

The end goal of the new venture in restructuring education programs to meet the need of P.L. 94-142 would seem well guided by specification of competencies and levels of assessment. It would seem that many of the traditional notions of discrete, independent courses may have to give way to increased interdependence and cooperation of faculty members.

Summary

The College of Saint Teresa experience seems to strongly make two points. First, currently there seems to be overlap on content in education training sequences. Perhaps thorough departmental studies are needed in colleges of education before any changes of the magnitude suggested by Deans' Grants is undertaken. Thinking in terms of competencies and the sequence of their coverage is necessary.

Second, there seems to be a close match between several areas of regular and special education. Jargon differences and the level of mastery expected of students may currently be two impediments to developing common proficiencies in teachers. It, however, should certainly not be construed that there are no differences. There is substantial overlap of these two domains. This should be ferreted out and utilized for efficient instruction. Likewise there are also some discrete areas. These should be studied to ascertain the specifics that special education has to offer to the new restructuring of teacher training to meet the requirements of P.L. 94-142.